

Joni and Friends Honors First Disability Studies Master's Grads

As master's degree candidates at California Baptist University prepare to receive their diplomas Friday evening, a special group was honored by the Joni and Friends Christian Institute on Disability for completing the first-ever master's level program in Disability Studies, with an emphasis on either disability ministry or policy.

The Christian Institute on Disability (CID) was established by the Joni and Friends International Disability Center in 2007 to provide training and education in the area of disability ministry and suffering, as well as to sound the alert and inform Christians about the need for biblical perspective on value-of-life issues such as stem cell research and euthanasia.

The CID now partners with 22 academic institutions in courses on the theology of suffering and disability ministry training, and has provided clarity on some of the most difficult social issues with statements, position papers and other resources available on its website.

Altogether, 12 master's degree candidates for the MA in Disability Studies, participated in commencement at California Baptist University (CBU) on Friday evening on the Front Lawn. As far as the CID and CBU are aware, these are the first master's degrees in disability ministry ever awarded as well as the first in disabilities studies from Bible-based curriculum.

The CID has been working with universities and seminaries around the country and the world to develop curricula in the areas of theology of suffering and disability ministry. The

partnership with CBU began in 2007 with this master's level curriculum and will likely expand in the future to include undergraduate degrees. Another unique aspect of the course is that it is done entirely online, and of the dozen 2012 graduates, 10 came in from elsewhere in the country and state to attend the graduation ceremony.

In advance of the ceremony, the CID hosted a celebratory dinner in honor of the graduates at Westlake Village Inn in Westlake Village, Calif., on Thursday evening. Each of the graduates received a special award from Joni and Friends, with congratulatory greetings from Founder and CEO Joni Eareckson Tada, President Doug Mazza, and Jeff McNair, director of the CID's Public Policy Center who oversees the M.A. in Disabilities Studies program at CBU. McNair was also honored with a Distinguished Leadership Award for his leadership in Disability Ministry.

"We are so proud of these 12 graduates and their commitment to disability ministry," McNair said. "While four of the students did an emphasis in ministry, eight did an emphasis in policy, and we are excited to see how both groups will be used to affect their churches and their culture."

"We are also pleased with how well the program has turned out. I have found other certificate courses and programs online in this field, but nothing like the academic rigor of a graduate degree in disability ministry," McNair added. "We discuss the same authors that would be discussed in a secular program, however, we also devote significant time to understanding disability/impairment from a Christian perspective, whether graduates are studying ministry or policy."

Next year's class size will be nearly double, with 23 students having begun the program in the fall of 2011, from all across the U.S. and Canada. "We look forward to continuing to grow this program as well as begin partnerships with new universities and expand more of our existing programs into

undergraduate studies," McNair concluded.

For more than 30 years, Joni and Friends International Disability Center has worked to accelerate ministry to the disability community, offering a wide array of life-affirming ministries to people with disabilities around the world. Joni and Friends does this through the Christian Institute on Disability; the International Disability Center; international radio and television programs filled with inspirational stories; , which every year sees thousands of individuals receive wheelchairs and the life-giving message of the Gospel, and Family Retreats, where families affected by disability learn they are not alone.